



Talk with Your Fifth Grader About Underage Alcohol Use



Reach Out Now

Your fifth grader is trying on new clothes, new friends, and new behaviors. Could alcohol be involved in those new behaviors? About 10.9 million youth ages 12–20 are underage drinkers,¹ so fifth grade is not too early to start talking with your child about underage alcohol use. Starting a dialogue about underage alcohol use isn't easy, but this publication can help you and your fifth grader get started. You may be amazed by what you learn about your child and what your child can learn from you. The benefits of that dialogue can last a lifetime.

*Charles G. Curie, SAMHSA Administrator
U.S. Department of Health and Human Services*

You Can Make a Difference

Parents' disapproval of underage alcohol use has been identified as one of the key reasons youth choose *not* to drink.² The goal of the **REACH OUT NOW** program is to prevent underage alcohol use.

Use the ideas and activities presented here as guidelines to adapt to your own style and your own words. Remember, no one knows your child as well as you do, and no one has more influence on your child's behavior.³

In Fifth Grade, Your Child Is at a Critical Age

Many parents feel that their 10- or 11-year-old child is too young to discuss underage alcohol use. While it is true that most fifth graders do not drink alcohol, some 10- and 11-year-olds have begun experimenting with it. In one study, one-third of fourth graders and more than half of sixth graders reported that friends had pressured them to drink alcohol.⁴

Now is the time to talk about underage alcohol use. After all, your child may already have access to alcohol and may have been faced with making decisions for which he or she is not yet prepared. Help provide the knowledge and understanding children need to recognize why they should not be drinking, and help them build the practical skills to reject alcohol.

Six Key Actions

Here are six actions⁵ you can take to help your child make wise decisions about alcohol use:

- ▶ Establish and maintain good communication with your child.
- ▶ Get involved, and stay involved, in your child's life.
- ▶ Make clear rules and enforce them with consistency and appropriate consequences.
- ▶ Be a positive role model.
- ▶ Teach your child to choose friends wisely.
- ▶ Monitor your child's activities.



Using This Guide

This page contains facts about underage alcohol use for you and your child and tips for talking about alcohol. Use the powerful information below and in the suggested activities to talk with your child about this important topic.

Facing Facts

- Most children and youth do not drink alcohol. In fact, nearly 60 percent of youth ages 12–17 have never had a drink.⁶
- Individuals who begin drinking before age 15 are four times more likely to develop alcohol dependence or problems with alcohol abuse at some time in their lives.⁷
- In a recent national survey, 71 percent of eighth graders said alcohol was “fairly easy” or “very easy” to get.⁸
- It takes less alcohol to damage a young brain than a mature one, and the young brain is damaged more quickly.⁹

Talk and Action Go Hand in Hand

As someone who cares for and about a child, you are in a position of tremendous influence. What you do and say every day can affect your child’s attitude about underage alcohol use.



If you provide a clear and consistent message that underage alcohol use is unacceptable and keep lines of communication open, it is more likely that your child will continue to look to you for advice on this and other serious issues in the future. Regardless of whether you drink alcohol, you can take some steps¹⁰

to lessen the likelihood that your child will engage in underage alcohol use:

- Discuss family rules about the use of alcohol. This may include a discussion of alcohol used in religious observances.
- Make it clear that alcohol use before age 21 is unacceptable and against the law. Explain that alcohol has many negative effects on people of different ages, but that its effects on the



developing brain and body of a person under the age of 21 are especially harmful.

- Follow the federal recommendation that adults who drink should limit alcohol consumption to 1–2 drinks per day. Remember that drinking and driving don’t mix, and that the same goes for alcohol and prescription medicine.
- Monitor alcohol kept in your home.
- Consider not serving alcohol to other adults at child-focused events, such as graduations or birthday parties.
- Think carefully about what to tell children when they ask whether you used alcohol as a teen. If you were an underage alcohol user, share some of the lessons you have learned from that experience. Be clear in explaining why underage alcohol use was not a good idea then, and that it is not a good idea now.

If you or a family member is in recovery, now is the time to talk with your child about the disease of alcoholism. You need to explain that your child may be more vulnerable to developing a drinking problem if he or she chooses to drink alcohol.

The **True/False Quiz** is a tool to help you continue a discussion about your family’s rules and consequences regarding underage alcohol use. When talking with your child, listen first, then ask questions. Remember to send a clear, consistent message about underage alcohol use. The earlier you begin sharing with your child, the more he or she will value communication with you as an important part of life. Remember: When you talk to your child about underage alcohol use, your child will listen.

Alcohol: A True/False Quiz

Directions

Read each statement aloud, then discuss the answers given below. Use this as an opportunity to explain your family's rules about underage alcohol use. Your child's teacher will use this quiz as part of a lesson about the effects of alcohol.

1. *Alcohol slows down your body and mind.*

True. Alcohol is a depressant; it leaves you unable to think, react, and make decisions as you normally would. If you drink enough to get alcohol poisoning, your brain slows down so much you can slip into a coma or even die.¹¹

2. *Alcohol affects different people in different ways.*

True. The effects of alcohol depend on a person's age, gender, body weight, and hereditary factors. People can be affected by alcohol differently depending on the time of day, how much they've eaten, how tired they are, and many other factors. Alcohol has a stronger effect on the bodies and brains of young people than it does on those of an adult, because young bodies are smaller and still developing.¹²

3. *You feel alcohol's effects right away.*

True. Alcohol is absorbed into the bloodstream very quickly (within 5–10 minutes). It passes from your stomach directly into your bloodstream and affects every organ, including your brain.¹³

4. *Beer and wine coolers are as harmful as other forms of alcohol.*

True. Beer and wine coolers are just as harmful to the developing brains of children as other forms of alcohol. There is about the same amount of alcohol in a 12-ounce can of beer as there is in a mixed drink that contains 1.5 ounces of hard liquor, a 5-ounce glass of wine, or a wine cooler.¹⁴

Sources for More Information

Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA): www.samhsa.gov

SAMHSA's National Clearinghouse for Alcohol and Drug Information (NCADI): (800) 729-6686, www.ncadi.samhsa.gov

National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism (NIAAA): www.niaaa.nih.gov

Cool Spot: www.thecoolspot.gov

Leadership to Keep Children Alcohol Free: www.alcoholfreechildren.org

U.S. Department of Education's Office of Safe and Drug-Free Schools: www.ed.gov/about/offices/list/osdfs/index.html

5. *Some of the signs¹⁵ that a person has a problem with alcohol are:*

- Believing that alcohol is necessary to have fun.
- Lying about how much alcohol he or she is using.
- Forgetting what happened while drinking.
- Getting drunk on a regular basis.

True. You can and should help by encouraging the person to stop drinking and to seek professional help.





Taking Action

Role-Play Healthy Decisions

In this activity, you and your fifth grader will role-play ways of refusing alcohol. Finding creative ways to say “No” requires lots of practice.

Begin a discussion with your child about making healthy decisions by sharing some of the ways that you make decisions. These might include *getting the facts*, *considering options*, *telling others your decision*, and *accepting their responses*. Ask how your child makes up his or her mind about important issues. Then discuss ways of politely but firmly refusing when someone asks you to do something you have decided not to do. Practice these four techniques for saying “No”:

- **Repeat:** “No, I don’t want to.” “No thanks.” “No, I can’t.”
- **Justify:** “I can’t. I have to ____.” (Make an excuse.)
- **Substitute:** “No, let’s ____.” (Substitute another activity.)
- **Walk Away:** “No. I have to go.”

Create a Family Calendar

If you don’t already do so, start keeping track of family schedules on one calendar. Post the calendar on the refrigerator or in another prominent spot and ask each family member to keep it current by updating his or her upcoming activities. A calendar can help you monitor your child’s activities and stay involved. Make a point of discussing with your child the details of his or her schedule—the where, when, what, and with whom—for every activity. It is much easier to establish rules and routines when your child is in fifth grade than it is when your child is 16 or 17, in high school, and able to drive.

Resources

Federal Government Organizations

- Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration—www.samhsa.gov
- National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism (NIAAA)—www.niaaa.nih.gov

National Organizations

- American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP)—www.aap.org
- American Medical Association (AMA)—www.ama-assn.org
- Community Anti-Drug Coalitions of America (CADCA)—<http://cadca.org>
- Join Together—www.jointogether.org
- Leadership to Keep Children Alcohol Free—www.alcoholfreechildren.org
- Mothers Against Drunk Driving (MADD)—www.madd.org
- National Council on Alcoholism and Drug Dependence (NCADD)—www.ncadd.org
- National Family Partnership—www.nfp.org

Use the following role-playing situations as a springboard to encourage your child to practice saying “No.” You may want to play the role of the “friend,” with your child speaking as himself or herself. These situations are only suggestions. You may want to use or add examples that are relevant to your life and that of your child.

Friend: “Let’s go bike riding. We’re not going far, so we don’t need helmets.”

Your Child: _____

Friend: “Let’s hitchhike to the mall. Lots of kids do it. We’ll be back before anyone knows we’re gone.”

Your Child: _____

Friend: “I got this beer from the basement. Here, try it.”

Your Child: _____

Help your child envision the worst thing that could happen if he or she says “No.” Encourage your child to discuss his or her worries and concerns. Is he or she afraid of being embarrassed? Of losing a friend?

Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration

SAMHSA

